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"Trust Me, You Can't Trust Them": Stigmatised Knowledge in Cults and Conspiracies

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“TRUST ME, YOU CAN’T TRUST THEM” - STIGMATISED KNOWLEDGE IN CULTS AND CONSPIRACIES

Conspiracy theories are generally subject to ridicule, considered to be without basis or fact, and un-scientific. When people are asked about conspiracy theories they will often mention the illusive Illuminati, lizard people and Roswell (respectively, referring to an alleged group of secret rulers of the world, David Icke’s theory that reptilians in human form are running the world, and an alleged UFO landing in Roswell, USA, assumed to be covered up by American authorities). As Barkun (2003) astutely observed, conspiracy beliefs involve ‘stigmatised knowledge’ that lurks in the margins of society. Dominant understanding and usage of the concept of conspiracy theory posits such knowledge as both irrational and as having an anti-establishment (or anti-hegemonic) position.

In a similar way, ‘cult’ in popular culture is a label used to stigmatise a minority religion; it is essentially a religion that the user of the term does not like. Upon hearing the word ‘cult’ many people think of a closed group with an authoritarian leader, such as Peoples Temple (and the tragedy at Jonestown in 1978 where over 900 people died) or the Branch Davidians (many of whom died in the fire at Waco, after a stand-off between the Branch Davidians and US federal and state agents in 1993). Although the word cult can also be a technical term and encompass a variety of more specific meanings, it shares with the term ‘conspiracy theory’ a position of marginality in popular parlance.

Conspiracy theories are most often associated with those who *believe* that rationally planned and executed evil plots are being perpetrated against them; the label ‘conspiracy theory’ is often used to stigmatise both the beliefs and those who believe them. Barkun (2003) argues that conspiracy theorists understand the universe to be governed by design rather than by randomness; nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. The conspiracist’s world is meaningful, it delineates and explains evil (*Ibid.*:3). We use the term conspiracy belief/s as well as conspiracy theory/ies, acknowledging that they both commonly involve beliefs delineating metaphysical elements (or design) rather than simply empirical positions. Conspiracy beliefs, and believers, are generally not evaluated in popular discourse solely according to the rules of philosophical and empirical analysis, i.e. on the evidence base of the theory they propose. Rather those ascribing to conspiracy beliefs are often judged on the marginality or even rarity of their beliefs. Thus belief becomes an important aspect of a conspiracy theory for both those supporting a particular conspiracy theory and those opposing such a theory.

There is great diversity of beliefs and practices within socially marginal groups, religious or otherwise. But it is also worth considering characteristics that many socially marginal groups have in common. Here, it can be useful to return to Colin Campbell’s concept of a ‘cultic milieu’ (1972). The cultic milieu is a permanent feature of society, which is oppositional by nature – the one thing that those in the cultic milieu have in common is rejection of the status quo and selective dominant paradigms. Sometimes there are good reasons for opposing the status quo and

dominant paradigms, and many religious traditions have a long history of providing compelling narratives for doing exactly that.

The oppositional nature of the cultic milieu encourages groups and networks to take a sectarian stance, creating social and conceptual boundaries between 'us' and 'them' – those on the outside. Ideological or religious narratives often create a hierarchy in this division, where 'us' is good, right, or even spiritually or supernaturally superior - and 'them' is negative, wrong, bad, or even evil. Minority groups or networks within the cultic milieu are knowingly marginal, and narratives of dark conspiracies against them are appealing. This chapter will explore the sociology of conspiracy theory in areas of the contemporary cultic milieu, identifying rational social reasons for allegiance to a particular theory as often being more compelling for individuals than the apparent 'empirical' truth or falsity of the theory itself.

Before discussing some specific case studies, it would be wise to consider the idea of conspiracy theories in a bit more detail. By definition, a conspiracy belief should mean nothing more than a theory of a conspiracy, a secret plan by a group to do something. There are many examples of real conspiracies, including the plot to assassinate Caesar, the 1605 gunpowder plot, the Tuskegee, USA syphilis study, the Watergate affair,¹ government surveillance, documented corporate cover-ups (such as the dangers of asbestos, tobacco) and the cover-up of child sexual abuse by the Roman Catholic Church. For several minority religious groups, such as the Weaver family at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, in 1993, fear of US-government persecution led to spirals of deviance amplification, which ended in the violent fulfilment of conspiracy beliefs. Fringe communities may have legitimate views on particular issues. Logically, Pigden argues, since history is full of conspiracy theories that have since been established as fact, every "historically and politically literate person is a big-time conspiracy theorist" (2007: 222).

But at the same time, conspiracy beliefs are closely tied with notions of marginality and stigma. Stigmatised knowledge is, as it says, stigmatising; such narratives are generally rejected by 'them', the majority who are likely to reject anti-hegemonic narratives as conspiracy theory. Thus 'conspiracy theorist' is a stigmatising label that functions to defame and denounce someone as 'other' and less rational (hence less worthy) – even ridiculous, while affirming the collective of the majority. Neil Levy argues that being in conflict with accounts put forward by the relevant epistemic authorities is an essential aspect of conspiracy theories and he takes the hard-line position that it is almost never rational to accept such theories (2007: 181).

Sometimes social groups work hard to enforce the norms and boundaries of what define the community and its concerns. For example, Kai Erikson's research on early Puritan settlements in the USA analysed apparent 'crime waves' in these communities (1966). Erikson found that the Puritans essentially acted against trivial deviances from their norms (rather than real threats), in order to define who they were and what their mission was. The moral boundaries of the Puritan settlements had been under threat for a number of reasons, and the identification and punishment of deviants (from the norms) reaffirmed the Puritan's collective conscience at the

¹ Although according to Steve Clarke this is still only an 'official explanation' that has been widely accepted (2007: 168).

time. In this example, whether or not the Puritans focused on deviance or crime was largely determined by the need of the community to define its collective conscience. Similarly, the definition of 'conspiracy theory' as marginal to the mainstream is a way for our culture to enforce the majority understandings.

But boundary maintenance involves work from both sides. Those who hold non-mainstream theories often work actively to reinforce these beliefs with bonds of social identity. And the scientific community, for example, is not necessarily considered trustworthy by everybody: it might be accused of flawed thinking, institutional bias, or even be considered to be part of the conspiracy. While Levy's conclusion (2007) is that it is almost never rational to accept conspiracy theories, this idea needs further discussion. By emphasizing the social positioning of conspiracy theories, we can open up an interesting avenue to explore the importance of social construction of meaning.

Our Socialised Knowledge

As Karl Popper stated: "our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite" (2002 [1963]: 38). In the case of knowledge, increasing specialisation has, in some way, further increased our ignorance. Jargon keeps many amateurs at bay while reduced access to specialist materials (such as journals behind pay walls) makes some knowledge a matter of privilege. Expertise makes us singularly knowledgeable in certain fields, yet ignorant in other matters; hence we must rely on other experts on a daily basis. Experts can be contested, because knowledge is complicated, and often disputed – especially in a diverse society (Collins and Evans, 2007). There are different types of marginal knowledge, from forgotten knowledge (the stuff our ancestors and grand-parents knew, but we have forgotten), ignored and rejected knowledge (not deemed helpful for us, yet often picked up by others), dangerous knowledge (sensitive or considered too powerful for some to know, like esoteric knowledge), to stigmatised knowledge. Barkun elaborates on the idea of 'stigmatised knowledge' as:

claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the fact of the marginalisation of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like (Barkun 2003: 26).

A sociology of knowledge, then, also involves by implication a sociology of ignorance, termed 'agnotology' (from the Greek *agnōsis*, "not-knowing") by Proctor and Schiebinger (2008). The latter raises interesting questions of who is ignorant, why, and in what ways. Ignorance could have a variety of causes, and we are all ignorant in some way (as mentioned above). In some cases, of course, 'being left in the dark' could be the result of purposeful and strategic design to protect dangerous or sensitive knowledge (such as restricting access to nuclear sites) or even an orchestrated conspiracy. A well-evidenced example of a deliberate, orchestrated conspiracy of ignorance is the mis- and dis-information campaigns coordinated by the tobacco industry over decades to produce doubt, hence ignorance, over the effects of smoking in causing cancer (Proctor 2008).

The point here is clearly not whether someone is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but that ignorance, like knowledge, is socially constructed and negotiated, and since we don’t always share cognitive orientations, we end up judging ignorance from our own cognitive orientations (Smithson 1985). As in the case of mis- and dis-information about links between tobacco and cancer, the empirical truth may only be clear historically, when the mainstream social discourse has shifted significantly, and post-hoc facts and/or narratives have allowed for an accepted ‘truth’. “Thus, well-socialised Western adults generally avoid what is socially understood as ‘superstition’, ‘subversive political beliefs’, and other illegitimate thought-ways, insofar as these are discredited interpretive frameworks” (*Ibid.*:152). Yet, for other groups, these may be very valid interpretive frameworks.

For specific groups ascribed ‘ignorance’ can come from relying on other epistemic authorities, or relying on other paradigms altogether. An example here would be that of ‘self-knowledge’, where people choose to rely on their intuition and ‘gut feeling’ rather than rational knowledge. A good example of this is that of applied kinesiology which makes an empirical science of testing muscle resistance to uncover deeper access to intuitive ‘truths’ held in the body, particularly in identifying what lifestyle changes are needed to bring an individual into better health (International College of Applied Kinesiology UK 2015). This emphasis on self-knowledge is often seen by enthusiasts as a necessary corrective in our society of experts, and has filtered from the fringe ‘new age’ into more mainstream ideas (Heelas 1996).

Coady (2007) and Levy (2007) argue that we are both utterly reliant on experts, and suffer from the ‘illusion of explanatory depth’ (i.e., we are ignorant of our own ignorance). Hence we may not be able to assuage which experts are ‘right’, with authorities being chosen not necessarily according to their epistemological skills, but according to credibility. Coady argues that people are more likely to believe ‘official stories’, those propagated by institutions that have the power to influence what is believed at a particular time and place - hence political or epistemic authorities (2007: 200). Levy, too, states that responsible believers ought to accept explanations offered by properly constituted epistemic authorities (properly constituted means they are embedded in our social worlds) (2007: 185). However, according to Levy, due to our illusion of explanatory depth, there is a strong temptation for some groups to disbelieve the ‘official stories’ in favour of other epistemic authorities (*Ibid.*: 186). Examples of social networks where alternative epistemic authorities become a focus for particular communities will be the focus of the two extended case studies of this chapter.

This discussion of knowledge, ignorance and relative social power brings a new dimension to the concept of conspiracy theory, and allows for a more nuanced and sociological understanding of the role of conspiracy thinking in contemporary society, and how it is viewed, as it involves social meanings and structures. There are credible conspiracy beliefs, and less credible ones, but credibility is subjective. Furthermore, such beliefs are social. Different conspiracy beliefs have adherents with specific demographics. Why is this so, and how does this happen?

Cultures of Conspiracy

In the US, conspiracy theories correlate with political affiliation, with each side showing preference for specific ‘favourite theories’ (Public Policy Polling, 2013). Some conspiracies were more favoured among Democrats (e.g. that Bush intentionally misled on Iraq’s weapons of mass

destruction) whereas others (e.g. that global warming is a hoax) were more favoured among Republicans (*Ibid*). These demographic correlations with particular ‘theories’ in America are echoed with racial identification. Ted Goertzel (1994) found that African-American respondents were more likely than white or Hispanic respondents to believe in the conspiracies which specifically affected their community; American blacks were more likely than other groups to believe the FBI killed Martin Luther King, the CIA put drugs in their community, and that AIDS was created to wipe out the American black community. Specifically, many African-Americans saw a parallel between AIDS and the Tuskegee syphilis experiments conducted from 1952-72, with a knowledge of this historical test predisposing African-Americans to suspect AIDS might have emerged in similar circumstances (1994: 740). Alex Jones (Texas-based host of InfoWars.com/PrisonPlanet.TV) argues that the USA is singling out and profiling white Americans as terrorists (for example, see article and comments after Kabbany 2016),² while many other voices argue instead that blacks and Muslims in the USA are more likely to be singled out (for example, Welsh 2006). Similarly, Muslims across the globe are more likely than those of other religions or no religion to believe that 9/11 was perpetrated by forces other than Bin Laden (Pew Global 2011).

Specific beliefs pervade throughout different and often definite enclaves of the cultic milieu. Millennial beliefs, especially those regarding the imminent return of Jesus Christ, often focus on specific teachings around the expected occurrences leading up to this event, including Satan/the anti-Christ controlling parts of the government, the seven-headed beast as the New World Order and predictions that humans will be enslaved. A spectrum of these beliefs can be found in some Christian sectarian groups as well as parts of more ordinary evangelical or Pentecostal churches. In some groups, current events are actively interpreted to look for signs of the ‘End Times’, although the extent to which this speculation is a central focus varies among congregations (Thompson 2005). Yet such beliefs, or aspects of them, can also be found among some communities that on the surface appear to be more political than religious. The idea that humans will eventually be enslaved by ‘the system’ and micro-chipped (or receive a barcode tattoo) can be shared by Christian, political and environmental groups, for example. Similarly, beliefs that ‘Big Pharma’ is creating diseases (such as ADHD, certain mental illnesses) for profit, so that they can sell the medication that supposedly cures the problem, can also be found among a variety of milieus, from the religious and political to the spiritual, including parts of the medical establishment (see Goldacre 2013; Singler 2015, 2016). Some of these ideas are entering what many would consider mainstream circles.

According to Ted Goertzel (1994), minority status and ‘anomia’ are the strongest determinants of belief in conspiracies, with minority status also being strongly correlated with ‘anomia’ and with lower levels of interpersonal trust.³ He measured ‘anomia’ on a scale of items designed to tap into feelings of discontent with the established institutions of contemporary society (measuring the

² Jones’ views on race are as multi-faceted as they are controversial. For example in May 2015, Jones and www.infowars.com organized a rally in front of a Planned Parenthood in Austin, Texas, accusing Planned Parenthood of continuing the policy outlined by its founder Margaret Sanger’s ‘admitted targeting of the black community and all innocent children’ with a policy of ‘genocide of black lives by abortion’ (Infowars.com, 2015).

³ Goertzel uses the term ‘anomia’ rather than anomie. We shall use his term, as he uses it, but put it in quotes.

belief that the situation of the average person is getting worse, that it is not fair to bring a child into today's world, and that most public officials are not interested in the average man) (1994: 736). Hence, Goertzel associated belief in conspiracies with the feelings of alienation and disaffection from the system. Two decades later, this hypothesis persists, with an interdisciplinary research centre at Cambridge University focusing on the research question: 'What does the prevalence of conspiracy theories tell us about trust in democratic societies?' (CRASSH 2013). Indeed, what does the prevalence of conspiracy theories tell us about diversity, subcultures, their experts, and official accounts?

An interesting example here is hip hop culture. Travis L. Gosa (2011) has written about hip hop culture, where the dominant narrative is 'counterknowledge', a subversive racial reframing of social problems.⁴ Here 'white-controlled spaces' and passive acceptance of dominant narratives are derided, while ideas of intrinsic and ancient wisdom are glorified, along with a strong anti-authority narrative. According to Gosa,

Key to hip hop culture is the de-privileging of expert knowledge gained through participation in white controlled spaces such as schools, and the problematization of passive acceptance of dominant narratives. The truth and valuable skills, in the world of hip hop, can also be attained through lived-experience and —feeling it (2011: p.5-6).||

Gosa argues that the function of the use of conspiracy theories, or counterknowledge, in hip hop is to provide entertainment, while also integrating identity politics and challenging dominant knowledge. Hence it is entertainment, yet also political (Gosa 2011). As Public Enemy's Chuck D has famously said, "Rap is the black man's CNN" (Thorpe 1999).

The message in hip-hop music is meant to address problems facing the black community, problems that are often ignored by the mainstream media. In doing so, hip hop provides an alternative discourse, critical of the establishment and the status quo. See, for example, the song Obama Nation Part 2 by British hip-hop artist Lowkey (which also features the U.S. artist M1 and British artist Black The Ripper) about US President Barack Obama:

Articulate and handsome, Afghanistan held for ransom
By the hand of this black man, neo-colonial puppet
White power with a black face, he said fuck it I'll do it
A master of disguise, expert at telling lies
Then they gave him a Nobel Peace Price
Should of known he was trained in Chicago
Word to Chairmen Fred and Mark Clark
What they do in the dark will come out in the light
Like a wikileaks site

⁴ See also Partridge in this volume for more on conspiracy theories and popular music.

(Lowkey, 2011)

Lowkey vocalizes the thoughts of a subculture that finds itself in opposition to the mainstream political powers, reinforcing its scepticism about the gap between rhetorical ideals and the foreign policy reality of the United States in authorizing unmanned predator drone strikes on many countries in Africa and the Middle East. Despite great hope that the election of the first black US President might change the US and global political situation, this community was greatly disappointed that the status-quo remained largely the same.

More historically, a particular influential force in early hip hop culture in the USA has been the Five Percent Nation (also known as the Nation of God and Earths, founded by Clarence 13X Smith after he left the Nation of Islam). The Five Percent Nation (or Five Percenters), derives its name from the belief that only five percent of the population is righteous. Five Percenters tend to follow non-traditional variants of Islam, non-standard historical accounts, and 'Supreme Mathematics' (numerology tools supposedly for unlocking the keys to reality and the universe). They teach that black people are the original people of Earth who founded all civilization, and that in fact the 'blackman' is God. They also consider that white people have deceived society into honouring and worshipping false gods and idols. Some Five Percenters profess their views through rap and hip hop music, and they have been influential in the genre – artists include members of the Wu-Tang Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, and many more. Some have moved on from the Five Percent Nation, and others claim that although they were influenced by the ideas, they were never formally associated with the group. Nonetheless, the Five Percenters, and their particular use of language, are often considered a major influence on the early days of hip hop (for example, see Knight 2008 and Allah 2010).

Five Percenters generally do not consider their beliefs a religion, despite their goals including achievement of national consciousness (consciousness of man's divine origin, black people as the first nation to exist) and peace (achieved through Supreme Mathematics). Another goal is community control, control of the educational, economic, political, media and health institutions of their community. A clear overarching desire communicated by these goals is the subversion of the current (white) authorities and independence and self-reliance of the black community. This can be done through knowledge of the self, by getting in touch with one's inner god. Another important source of reliable information is the intellectual community on the street surrounding the alternative book dealers (Gosa 2011: 12-14), which provides a subculture of alternative knowledge. Then, hip hop artists themselves spread (or 'drop') this knowledge through their music, and in some cases through their own books. The hip hop subculture has its own knowledge, and key figures become the epistemic authorities endowed with credibility, providing the 'official stories'.

Credibility becomes an important issue, as accepting knowledge can become about who you trust and identify with rather than about facts.⁵ As discussed above, the hip hop subculture favours self-

⁵ In another interesting example, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, in *The Power of Unreason* (2010), wrote that conspiracy beliefs need to be countered by government and critical thinking skills taught in schools. This backfired below the line, and the paper was followed by a lengthy online discussion questioning their institution (Demos, a British cross-party think tank), alleging it is part of a conspiracy itself (Boyle 2010). Allegations included that Demos, and the authors, were 'pushing propaganda on children', part of the Illuminati, with the authors being at best naïve or

reliance (inner god) and the credibility of the local street intellectuals and hip hop artists over the official accounts of white institutions. Gosa also explored how hip hop culture fits with Campbell's concept of the 'cultic milieu' (1972), where ideas are shared and strange coalitions may form. He cites the alliance of Alex Jones and black rappers working together to discuss theories about the New World Order and 9/11, illustrating how the cultic milieu creates unlikely allies in oppositional efforts (Gosa 2011: 9). In another example, on the basis of their separatist politics and belief in real racial distinctions, white supremacists and the Black Nation of Islam have joined forces to denounce the government (Gardell, 2002).

The Bilderberg Fringe Festival as Cultic Milieu

To recap, Campbell described the cultic milieu as a fertile ground inhabited by a 'society of seekers' who share a 'basic principle of tolerance and eclecticism' (1972: 127), and who oppose the dominant societal culture and embrace a variety of deviant and heterodox approaches to life. The realm of stigmatized knowledge, according to Barkun (2003), represents the broader intellectual universe into which both rejected knowledge and the cultic milieu may be fitted. Its marginal status is evidence of its truth; which is supported by narratives that authoritative institutions cannot be trusted, they are creating the fictions we live by, they are the tools of the malevolent forces, etcetera. Under the auspices of counter-hegemonic movement, multiple oppositional subcultures mix, mingle, and influence one another in the cultic milieu. The milieu is differentiated, and consists of many enclaves, not all of which share all their beliefs, and some of which may even have wildly opposing beliefs. But some ideas are shared. We elaborate on these ideas by illustrating the significance of reinforcing shared social bonds within the context of conspiracy theories.

A good example of these ideas is the Bilderberg Fringe Festival, organised in Watford, England, to coincide with the Bilderberg meeting of 2013. The Bilderberg meeting is an annual private conference of approximately 120–150 political leaders and experts from industry, finance, academia and the media (Bilderberg Meetings 2016). Or, this is the official account; other accounts commonly describe the group as the world elite (or The Secret Rulers of the World) working together to create a new world order (Estulin 2005 and Bilderberg.org 2016). Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist attended the Fringe Festival in June 2013 and the following discussion is largely based on her observations and notes.

at worst disinformation specialists or government agents (see the discussion at the Above Top Secret (ATS) Forum 2010). Similarly, just previous to this the paper "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures (2009)," by Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, caused outrage online after the authors argued government could 'cognitively infiltrate' spaces where 'false conspiracy theories' circulated. The irony of the suggestion to defeat conspiracy theories through the use of what essentially amounts to a conspiracy was not lost on commenters. It did not help that Cass became the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration soon after publication of the article.



PHOTO 1: 'OFFICIAL' FRINGE FESTIVAL PHOTO
POSTED ON
WWW.BILDERBERGFRINGEFESTIVAL.CO.UK

With approximately 2000 attendees (in a field where organisers had agreed with Watford police to only let 1000 in), there were more people at the Bilderberg Fringe Festival than at the G8 protest in London in 2013 (and there were far fewer at G8 protest in Northern Ireland). The author observed that many were turned away at the entrance due to overcrowding. Protesting the Bilderberg meeting is a relatively new development, as Bilderberg meetings in the past had been more secretive (the official website is still sparse), and information about them, including a list of participants, has only recently become more available (and accessing it slightly less stigmatising).⁶

⁶ Charlie Skelton (2016) was the first to begin reporting on the Bilderberg group in a broadsheet newspaper, The Guardian, in 2009, under the series title Our Man at Bilderberg – this series has returned annually. Skelton is a comedian, and the articles are comedic in nature.

The particular location of the 2013 meeting made access to, and protesting in, a field nearby the event easier.

The attendees of the Bilderberg Fringe Festival took conspiracy beliefs seriously, but at the same time organisers were happy to self-consciously draw humorous attention to the popular marginality of conspiracy ideas. For example, a functional map of the area posted on the media tent highlighted the 'plutocrat viewing zone' and identified the 'speaker's corner' (a reference to the North-East corner of Hyde Park historically reserved for public speaking and debates) as being on a small mound, referred to as the 'grassy knoll' (a reference to a small hill in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, often referred to as a possible site of (some of) the gunshots that killed John F. Kennedy, the then president of the USA).⁷

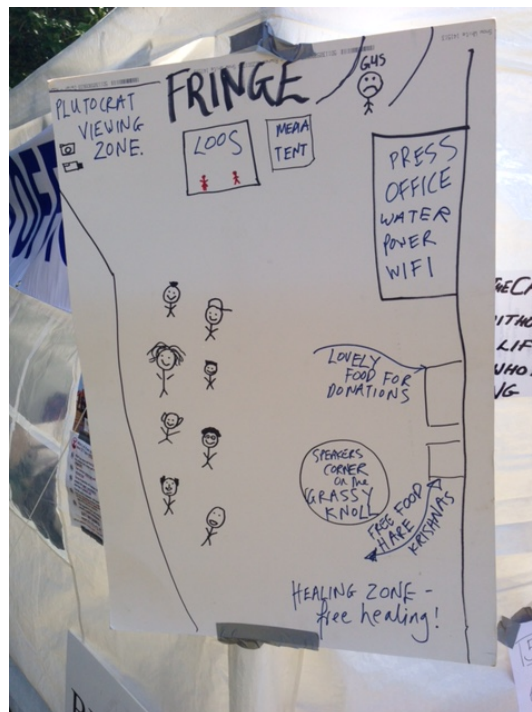


PHOTO 2: INFORMAL MAP OF FRINGE FESTIVAL
PHOTO BY VAN ECK DUYMAER VAN TWIST

The field held a range of attendees, with different areas offering posters (e.g. about the 'truth' of the Bilderberg group), information banners on special causes (for example, naming the parts of the British establishment that are implicated in the alleged cover-up of child sexual abuse (Join the Dots 2013), and a healing zone where alternative medical techniques were offered. There was free food, donated by some individuals, as well as a 'Hare Krishna' food cart (provided by the

⁷ The stick-figure labelled 'Gus', with the sad face, was the security guard, who struggled to keep the peace when the large crowd outside were told the event had reached its full capacity.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness). There were a handful of individuals holding *V for Vendetta* (2006) masks⁸ in their hands, suggesting that they identified with Anonymous (see Coleman 2014), but were not attending Anonymously (i.e. they were not wearing their masks). The speakers were varied as well, including some with specific campaigns (for example, Justice for Hollie (2016)), performers (poets, comedians), the late Labour MP Michael Meacher and the crowd-drawing conspiracy theory ‘celebrities’ Alex Jones and David Icke.

Michael Meacher (2013) pleased the crowds by stating his outrage with the Bilderberg meeting, where the “real leaders of Western finance capitalism were meeting without publishing an agenda or reports of proceedings.” He argued that some politicians were attending in an official capacity, yet there would be no report to Parliament, and concluded that this meeting amounted to the “biggest lobbyist group in Western capitalism, allowed to meet in total secrecy.” With this political analysis, Meacher had the crowd cheering. Icke (2013) also proved a popular speaker; he focused on Google’s presence at the Bilderberg meeting, and postulated that Google will develop the technology that will eventually turn people into robots, at the mercy of programmers. Alex Jones (2013) followed with a passionate populist speech about the leaders of the world designing pesticides to spread cancer and other diseases to kill parts of the population in an exercise of eugenics.

These three speakers in particular formed an interesting illustration of the cultic milieu, with its varied cultures and enclaves. Meacher appeared to present an argument the crowd generally were on board with, he managed to find an issue that was uncontroversial enough in these circles, and unified the disparate crowd. Icke also engaged well with the varied crowd, yet it is interesting to note here that he did not speak about some of the topics that make him more controversial (or even derided), and might have been more divisive – there was no mention of reptilians, for example. Jones ventured into more controversial topics, and the crowd became more divided. There were clearly people at the front who knew of him and seemed on board with what he was saying, perhaps avid viewers of his shows. Yet in the middle and back of the field people were chatting, and it also appeared an optimal moment to get in the toilet queues. It was clear that Meacher and Icke were aware of what issues would carry across cultures of this milieu, whereas Jones either did not, or chose to stick to his message, and alienate some of the crowd.⁹

The Bilderberg Fringe event was therefore a good illustration of the cultic milieu, with space allowed for a variety of points of view and styles of presentation, ranging from the deeply spiritual and religious to the political and, for some, ‘out there’ conspiracy theory. This large and varied crowd came together to protest the secrecy of the Bilderberg meeting, and could be further unified by some speakers, and on some matters, but on other occasions there was a clear tapestry of difference where some listened to a speaker while others meditated, received healing, chatted with friends, or danced together in their own little group – as they might at a music festival. The

⁸ The masks are from the film *V for Vendetta*, but represent Guy Fawkes, who (along with others) attempted to blow up the House of Lords on November 5 1605 in an attempt to assassinate King James I. In *V for Vendetta* the mask is used by an anarchist revolutionary who aims to bring down the government and convince people to rule themselves.

⁹ This might also have been due to the location, as Jones is less well known in the UK than in the US, and some of the details of issues he discussed may have more resonance with US audiences.

only moment of tension that day occurred at the entrance when large groups of people could no longer enter the field, this was handled by smooth joint efforts of Gus, some local police assigned to this event, and event organisers, who were involved in a voluntary capacity (and one of whom argued that such problems can always be resolved with love). Other than that, the ambiance of the day was jovial and generous, people were mingling and chatting, and volunteers distributed free food and drinks. Again, not unlike a music festival on a sunny day.

Closed Sources of Information – the case of Shugden

While the participants at the Bilderberg Fringe Festival might be best characterised by loose association to a cultic milieu, the protesters against the Dalai Lama, who in 2014-2015 organised under the organisation of the International Shugden Community (ISC), have very specific allegiances relating to a non-embodied figure called Shugden.¹⁰ Both the proponents and the antagonists in this conflict have strong personal experiences upon which to draw. Shugden practices can be understood as a 'cult' in the traditional sense of a cult in the Catholic Church; Shugden is one of a number of non-embodied personalities that a Tibetan Buddhist might ask for assistance. However the status and nature of Shugden is very much contested. The strength and intensity of the protest rests partially on 'facts' which are disputed by each side of the debate. The facts used by each side produce mutually exclusive, conflicting narratives. Each side reinforces its narrative by encouraging sympathizers to rely on information provided by select 'epistemic authorities' (Baurmann 2008), or 'authorized sources' and discounting any evidence or testimony produced from the other side. Through enquiry-led work at Inform, Suzanne Newcombe has been following the activities of the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), its dynamics with former members, the rhetorical debates around Shugden, and protests by pro-Shugden demonstrators against the Dalai Lama since 2008. During the revival of active protests against the Dalai Lama in 2014-2015, Newcombe monitored the conflict closely, researching English-language sources of information about the conflict and its history, and attended several events within this milieu.

Allegiance to a particular side of this controversy is very much about the question 'Who (or which sources) do you trust?' One participant at a public debate on Shugden in London exclaimed: 'We have our sources. You have your sources. Why not just let us believe and practice what we want?' (Rabten 2014: 1:29.50-1:30). This opinion was also echoed on Facebook discussions and as commentary on media articles (e.g. Nyema 2014). Both sides of this controversy could be described as encouraging an epistemic seclusion, where the opinions of respected lineage teachers and personal experience are given more weight than a systematic examination of evidence from all possible sources.

Opinions on the nature of Shugden could not be more diametrically opposed. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), have described Shugden as an evil spirit, preferring to use the title of Dolgyal to identify the spirit (Lopez 1998). The name of Dolgyal emphasizes narratives of Shugden's origin as a spirit identified while residing

¹⁰ Another organisation, the Western Shugden Society (WSS) served as the umbrella organisation organizing protests against the Dalai Lama between 1996-2008.

in the Dol area of (now) Chinese-controlled Tibet in around 1657 (Dreyfus 1998, Office of Tibet 1999, Bultrini 2013 and The Dolgyal Shugden Research Society 2014). Historically, Shugden has been more often channelled by oracles for advice, rather than being understood by practitioners as a fully-realised Buddha (see Dreyfus 1998 and Mills 2009).

The majority of Buddhists involved in the contemporary protest movement are associated with the UK-headquartered New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) a religious movement founded by Kelsang Gyatso in 1992. One sympathetic blogger made a conservative estimate that at least 70 percent of the ISC protesters were NKT members (IndyHack 2015a). Through this association with the NKT, the majority of ISC protestors would hold the view that Shugden is a fully enlightened emanation of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Gyatso 1997). In the Tibetan pantheon, Mañjuśrī is understood as a fully enlightened embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*) who will always act in the benefit of all sentient beings.

From the side of those who see Shugden as an evil spirit, the view promoted by the Dalai Lama, there are narratives of Shugden stealing power and energy from those who propagate him. For example Lama Zopa details how “those who strongly practice Dolgyal eventually end up dying in the most dangerous manner” (Zopa 2012: 2). Additionally, many Tibetan Buddhists, who view Shugden as malevolent, avoid using the name as a way of avoiding the negative attention of the spirit (Chandler 2009: 199 and Rigumi 2010).

The doctrinal differences became entrenched in 1996 when the Dalai Lama issued a series of public statements advising those who support him to abandon their practice of Shugden. There is an extended section on the CTA website detailing the Dalai Lama’s reasons for advising against the practice (Tibet.net 2015). While supporters of the Dalai Lama have admitted some discrimination may exist amongst the exile community, they deny an outright ‘ban’ and insist that what has occurred is largely self-segregation (Shugdeninfo.com 2014 and Barnett 2015).

Those who continue their Shugden practices insist the Dalai Lama has in fact issued a ban against the practice. Moreover, they claim that those in the Tibetan exile community who have continued a Shugden practice – as well as those who have been wrongly accused of having a Shugden practice – have been discriminated against, harassed, bullied, denied medical care, been made homeless, been refused sale of vegetables, have had their businesses boycotted and claim that one young man had fingers cut off by supporters of the Dalai Lama (International Shugden Community 2014a).

The status of Shugden in the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist community as a whole is complex. Any history of Shugden practice is inherently contested – as are the theological issues (see Dreyfus 2011). For a sincere practitioner, especially a ‘Western one’ with limited knowledge of Tibetan language and culture, how do you know what to think?

Here, the most pertinent question for the actors in this conflict is ‘Who do you trust?’ with trust often being put in the local teacher and community. The pro-Shugden groups relate to specific networks of Lamas, particularly associated with the leadership of Kundeling Rinpoche (Lobsang Yeshe (b. 1959)), Ganchen Lama (b. 1941) and Geshe Kelsang Gyatso (b. 1931). For the case of those participating in the protest movement personal bonds of loyalty to spiritual teachers are reinforced by the communal experience of protest. The ‘anti-Shugden’ groups actively affirm loyalty to the Dalai Lama and the ideal of Tibetan cultural unity.

The Shugden conflict is often framed by those invested in conflict in survivalist terms. The supporters of the Dalai Lama believe that they are the best hope for preserving authentic Tibetan culture that is threatened by Chinese occupation within Tibet (Thurman 2014). But there is an alternative theory circulating amongst Shugden practitioners that the Dalai Lama's attempt to negotiate limited Tibetan autonomy within Chinese-controlled Tibet (the controversial 'Middle Way' policy) will dilute Tibetan Buddhism into a hybrid and inauthentic pan-Chinese form of Buddhism. The theory here is that the Dalai Lama, by working with Chinese authorities, will destroy the authentic Buddhist traditions of Tibet (Personal Communications 2015).

This position can be nicely summed up in this photograph of the protests that took place in Aldershot, England on 28 June 2015 which was attended by Suzanne Newcombe. In the morning, on one side of the street were the members of the International Shugden Community (ISC), largely ethnically white, many with shaved heads and wearing robes that mark them as Western-born ordained Buddhists. On the other side, directly in front of Aldershot's Buddhist Community Centre and the Football Stadium (the venue for the Dalai Lama's public teaching that day), were ethnic Tibetans dressed in traditional cultural clothes. They were banging Tibetan drums and doing traditional dancing, perhaps in a hope of overpowering the shouts of 'Dalai Lama, Stop Lying' from the other side of the road.



PHOTO 3: ISC AND TIBETAN PROTESTORS IN FRONT OF THE FOOTBALL STADIUM IN ALDERSHOT, ENGLAND ON 29 JUNE 2015. PHOTO BY SUZANNE NEWCOMBE

On the far side of the street, the vertically striped 'Buddhist Flags' are being waved by many of the protesters. The author spoke to one ISC representative distributing leaflets who described these as specifically 'Gelug' flags, representing the undiluted purity of their lineage of Buddhist teachings. However, identical flags were also visible at the Tibetan Cultural Centre on the opposite side of the street, which was hosting the Dalai Lama. For the ISC protesters, the very possibility of enlightenment was seen as being threatened by the 'politics' of the Dalai Lama. On the near side, where the photo was taken, Tibetan national flags are visible; for the Tibetans, their culture and heritage is at stake with Chinese occupation, and the Dalai Lama is seen as a symbol of cultural

continuity and a focus of communal unity in the face of occupation. Both sides of the street meet their goals of manifesting internal community unity in the active rejection of the message of the opposite side of the street.

The experience of the protesters reinforces internal group connections, reinforcing group solidarity in the face of a visible, potentially dangerous 'other'. In autumn 2014, ISC protesters in the USA travelled on chartered busses together following the Dalai Lama's public speaking engagements. The protesters shared accommodation and meals, and a Facebook trail of participants emphasized group solidarity, finding the experience largely inspiring and motivating (for example, see Citron 2014a-g). The understanding of many western protestors centre on proactive and positive support for the Human Rights of their fellow Shugden-practitioners in India who they believe are being abused by the position of the Dalai Lama and the CTA (McBretney 2014). As evidence of intimidation by the Dalai Lama, Shugden practitioners draw attention to a page on the CTA website which 'names and shames' over 30 Tibetan nationals who have been active in protesting, in some cases giving an address of the pro-Shugden protesters (Tibetnet.com 2014). Some ISC activists prefer the anonymity in activism and internet communication due to fears for their personal safety; both sides actively fear violence from the other side.

Supporters of the Dalai Lama emphasise security breaches and the potential for assassinating the Dalai Lama, which supporters emphasise would be politically helpful for China. The potential for an individual to cause serious harm or death to the Dalai Lama is a serious risk for those charged with his security. A focus for those supporting the Dalai Lama is the dominant narrative around the murder of three Tibetans in exile in 1997, Lobsang Gyatso (1928–1997) and two of his students. Lobsang Gyatso had founded the School of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, was a close associate of the Dalai Lama, and was very vocal against Shugden practices. It was widely reported that the Indian police have been working on the assumption that these murders were committed by two Chinese citizens, associated with Shugden supporters based in New Delhi (Newsweek Staff 1997, Dalailama.com 2015, di Giovanni 1998 and Macartney 2007). Shugden supporters point out that there has never been any trial to prove the guilt of the assumed assailants. The actual violence in this incident remains in the narrative of both sides as a reminder of potential lethal violence, with both sides expressing anxiety for possible assassination attempts from the other side (see also International Shugden Community 2013: 155-157).

In 2015, Tibetan TV and Voice of America screened interviews with Lama Tseta Rinpoche in which he stated that he has personal knowledge of direct and specific routes of sponsorship from the Communist Party of China for Shugden supporters as a way of undermining the Dalai Lama's authority, increasing their control over Tibet and destroying Tibetan culture (Boston Tibetan Truthful Public Talk 2015: 18.30 and Voice of America 2015). His hearsay evidence is understood as 'truth' for most of the Tibetan community who support the Dalai Lama, proving a Chinese conspiracy inspiring the protests. On several occasions, followers of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso have breached security around the Dalai Lama to aggressively question the Dalai Lama about his stance on Shugden. With Lama Tseta's testimony, supporters of Shugden become, by definition, untrustworthy Chinese stooges for the supporters of the Dalai Lama, although this interview and a further Reuters article published in late December 2015 merely served as confirmation of what was already understood as an existing Chinese-driven conspiracy (Langue, Mooney and Kim 2015).

However, seen from the other side, individual protesters probably have little direct interest in Chinese-Tibetan politics – and indeed present the view that mixing religion and politics is an aberration of their Gelug Buddhist tradition. There is also evidence to suggest that individual Shugden practitioners within the exile community have experienced real prejudice and persecution (for example, see Mooney 2011). But pro-Dalai Lama supporters sometimes make simplistic claims that Shugden practitioners are in the ‘pay’ of the Chinese. Even if there is some truth to a pro-Shugden Chinese conspiracy (Langue, Mooney and Kim 2015), members of the NKT who join the ISC protests are primarily motivated by more local concerns and ‘noble’ motivations such as speaking out for the oppressed in the exile community and preserving their valuable dharma. Accusations that ISC members are ‘stooges’ of the Chinese government reinforce beliefs that the Dalai Lama is a ‘liar’, and the ‘The Worst Dictator in this Modern Day’ (International Shugden Community 2014b).

While there is ample information from many different perspectives on the Shugden conflict in English online, the pro-Shugden groups promote their own selective sources of online information and Twitter campaigns. When faced with a narrative challenge, ISC supporters have shown a pattern of engaging in *ad hominem* attacks against both the Dalai Lama and other individuals offering alternative sources of information. Images and literature have circulated within the pro-Shugden circles identifying the Dalai Lama as a spy, as Donald Trump, as the ‘Worst Dictator in the Modern World’, or a Muslim,¹¹ calling into question even the claim that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist (e.g. International Shugden Community 2014b and 2013, pp. 10-15).



PHOTO 4 SCREEN SHOT OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION ON @INDYHACK’S TWITTER FEED WHICH COMBINES THE FACE OF THE DALAI LAMA WITH CONTROVERSIAL US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE DONALD TRUMP (WHOSE RACIST AND MYSOGYNISTIC STATEMENTS WERE FREQUENTLY DENOUNCED IN THE UK PRESS) (INDY HACK 2015B)

¹¹ In a similar attempt to discredit, Alex Jones suggests that Barack Obama is a practicing Muslim (see Infowars.com, 2016).

In response, during 2015 some Tibetans began counter-demonstrations against some New Kadampa centres (because NKT members form the vast majority of ISC protesters), calling the group an 'Extremist Buddhist Cult' (Buddhism-controversy-blog.com 2015).

So who benefits from these exercises in public defamation and group solidarity? Both sides rely on production of doubt about 'opposition' evidence while encouraging loyalty to 'authentic' information from 'approved' sources supporting their own position, both from personal contacts and in trusted social media networks. This increases group solidarity for both the Shugden-supporters and Dalai-Lama supporters in the short term. Both groups become more isolated in their networks of trust, more fervent in the righteousness of their cause. Aspects of both side's conspiracy theories are likely to be true. But the primary reason for the vehemence with which each side holds its beliefs, and continues vocal demonstrations both online and on the street, is not so much to do with convincing evidence, but with demonstrating loyalty to a group and cause for which it is believed it is worth making sacrifices.

Conclusion – Cui Bono?

Conspiracy theories and beliefs are cultural, social, and specific to particular communities. They are anti-hegemonic, stigmatised knowledge narratives, where "... the proposed explanation must conflict with an 'official' explanation ..." (e.g. from government or other authoritative sources) (Coady 2003: 198). They function to strengthen a community, 'us', against 'them'. This does not mean that we can assume that people accept whole-heartedly all the beliefs and theories they encounter within a trusted community. In his research on a Pentecostal and millenarian church, Damian Thompson concluded that although believers professed allegiance to millennial doctrine, they actually assigned a low priority to the more marginal aspects of End Times teachings (2005). He reflected "I suppose if I had to boil it down to one observation, it would be that just because people say they 'believe' that such-and-such a thing will happen in the End Times that doesn't mean they invest heavily in those colourful beliefs. It's a sort of spiritual hobby, even entertainment" (Thompson 2011). And crucially, although people didn't actually believe 'the really weird stuff', Thompson found that they did identify with the community (2005).

Those positing a conspiracy often focus on the hidden puppeteers behind the scenes, engineers who maleficently orchestrate world events to the detriment of the 'regular people'. However, seen sociologically, the practical benefit in the case of conspiracies, relates little to the alleged perpetrators of the conspiracy – be they the Bilderberg illuminati, the New World Order, Shugden or the Chinese Communist Party. The famous question *Cui Bono?* (For whose profit?) may be better suited to those who ascribe to the beliefs and/or theories themselves, and as such join a community (real or virtual) of like-minded believers who will reinforce their fears and validate their beliefs, and as such help in the process of creating an identity that helps them navigate the risk and uncertainties of the wider society. Truth and facts can become a relational position based on ideology and loyalty in the case of many subcultural groups. From the perspective of marginal religious groups, belief in conspiracy theories might be very rational and come with social benefits of group solidarity, identification with a clear moral and belief-based community. The point of the theory is not necessarily about its truth – but about the effects of the belief for individuals within

socially marginalized networks. However, exchanges between the marginalized networks, majority opinion and political powers can have far-reaching and sometimes unintended consequences.

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Author bios:

Amanda van Eck Duymaer Van Twist, PhD, Deputy Director of Inform

Amanda is a sociologist who has been working at Inform since 1998 and has been Deputy Director since 2008. Inform is a non-profit information centre specializing in minority religious movements, spiritualities, and fringe political movements, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in London, UK. Amanda has lectured at the London School of Economics and at Kings College London. Her publications include contributions on topics such as beliefs in spirit possession and witchcraft, socialisation of children in sectarian new and minority religions, fraud in minority religions, and the methodological challenges of researching and providing information on 'cults and extremism'. Her monograph *Perfect Children, Growing Up on the Religious Fringe* was published by Oxford University Press in 2015.

Suzanne Newcombe, PhD, Research Officer for Inform

Suzanne has worked as a researcher for Inform since 2002 and specializes in the study of new and minority religions (particularly those with their roots in Hinduism and Buddhism) and the social history of yoga, Ayurveda and complementary/ alternative medicine. She is also an Associate Lecturer for the Open University in London and has lectured in Sociology of Religion at Kingston University London. Suzanne has appeared on BBC radio and television, co-edited a book on contemporary prophecy and published articles in edited books, the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Religion Compass* and *Asian Medicine*.